Summary of the
ARS Information Technology Management Self-Assessment

Introduction

On April 8 and 9, 1997, the ARS Information Technology Management Steering Committee conducted a self-assessment of ARS's management of its information technology resources. The purpose of the assessment was to identify issues needing greater attention and develop action plans to address those issues.

Participants

The members of the ITM Steering Committee carried out the self-assessment in a 2-day facilitated session. The members of the committee for this session were:

Bob Reginato
Associate Administrator
Washington, DC

Pamela André
Director
National Agricultural Library

Will Blackburn
Area Director
Ft. Collins, CO

Ruth Coy, Branch Chief
Information Staff
Greenbelt, MD

Steve Edney
Area Administrative Officer
Peoria, IL

George Foster
Acting Associate Area Director
College Station, TX

Wiz Horner
Associate Deputy Administrator, AFM
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Peter Johnsen
Director, National Center for
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Peoria, IL

Jean Steiner
Research Leader
Watkinsville, GA

Tom Walton
Director, National Animal Disease
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Process

The ITM Steering Committee hired a contractor, Coopers and Lybrand, to facilitate the self-assessment using GAO's Strategic Information Management (SIM) Self-Assessment Toolkit. GAO developed the assessment tool based on case study research of the SIM practices of senior management teams in leading organizations. GAO identified 11 best practices that the senior managers in these leading organizations used:

1. Recognize and communicate the urgency to change information management practices.
2. Get line management involved and create ownership.
3. Take action and maintain momentum.
4. Anchor strategic planning in customer needs and mission goals.
5. Measure the performance of key mission delivery processes.
6. Focus on process improvements in the context of an architecture.
7. Manage information systems projects as investments.
8. Integrate the planning, budgeting, and evaluation processes.
9. Establish customer/supplier relationships between line and information management professionals.
10. Position a Chief Information Officer as a senior management partner.
11. Upgrade skills and knowledge of line and information management professionals.

Assessment Results

The self assessment tool has six diagnostic areas with specific questions within each area. The steering committee members assessed ARS against these questions using the four-level rating system developed by GAO:

1 = unstructured, 2 = being defined, 3 = being implemented, 4 = institutionalized

Following are the mean assessment scores for each of the questions in the 6 diagnostic areas:

Diagnostic Area 1: The Importance of Information Management to the Agency Mission

Mean

2.10 Agency officials regularly assess their mission performance and identify potential contributions of IRM
1.90 Line managers are held accountable for achieving program results through the use of IRM.
1.70 Agency executives balance short-term and long-term approaches to improving IRM performance.

Diagnostic Area 2: Strategic Planning, Budget, and Evaluation Integration

Mean

3.00 Agency officials (a) identify and periodically reassess needs and priorities of customer groups, (b) incorporate needs into plans and goals, and (c) match products and services to customer groups.
2.10 Strategic planning, budgeting, and evaluation processes are (a) fully integrated, and (b) used to make key program improvement and IT investment decisions.

Diagnostic Area 3: Measure the Performance of Key Mission Delivery Processes

Mean

2.56 Managers use performance data in key management processes. They use baselines and benchmarks as tools for developing improvement goals.
2.44 The agency consistently uses a mix of outcome and efficiency performance measures to assess the impact of information management activities on mission delivery and productivity.

Diagnostic Area 4: Focus on Process Improvement in the Context of an Architecture

Mean

2.50 Improvement projects are customer-oriented and focused on core business processes.
2.30 The agency engages in process improvement efforts to create order-of-magnitude improvements.
2.20 The agency uses information and IT architectures to support its process improvement.

Diagnostic Area 5: Manage Information and Information Technology Projects as Investments

Mean

1.30 The agency uses an investment review board (IRB) led by executive managers to make key investment decisions.
1.30 The IRB uses a disciplined process to select and manage projects.
1.30 The IRB manages the proportions of expenditure on maintenance and strategic investments.

Diagnostic Area 6: Build Organization-Wide Capabilities To Address Mission Needs

Mean

2.50   Line managers identify information needs, while IRM professionals supply information
       products and services
2.00   The agency has a professional development program for line and information resource
       managers.
1.33   A CIO is placed as an executive management partner.

Recommended Actions

Based on this assessment, the ITM Steering Committee recommended establishment of three
action teams to:

1.   Revise the current Information Strategy Plan with an ARS focus

        •   Reinstate the information engineering effort
        •   Focus on ARS, not REE
        •   Include program support and program management

2.   Establish an Information Technology Review Board

        •   Capital planning and investment control
        •   Systematic review of information technology projects
        •   Integration of information technology investment into overall agency management

3.   Institutionalize top management support for information technology

        •   Stability across changing leadership
        •   Strategy for communication and elimination of barriers
        •   Develop overall policy and guiding principles

The Administrator agreed to these recommendations and since then, three additional teams have
been established:

4.   Redesign Program and Resource Management Processes and Systems
5.   Develop an Information/Communication Strategy for National Programs
6.   Research Information Needs